Paradise Without the Perrier

Traveler

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Highlight: The world is warming up—and how. We have, many experts believe, only a few years before the trend becomes impossible to reverse. Enter Soneva Fushi, the luxe little resort in the Maldives that is trying to do what no other yet has: decarbonize.* Bob Payne investigates the pleasures—and pitfalls—of a model paradise

Body

*TO OPERATE WHILE ABSORBING MORE CO2 THAN IS EMITTED

At Soneva fushi, a luxury resort entirely occupying one of the 1,190 low-lying coral islands that make up the Indian Ocean nation of the Maldives, I am sitting beside my private pool, which—I will try to say this without sounding too pretentious—has a palm tree growing on an island in the middle of it.

Oh, and even though I am looking out at my own swath of white sand beach and a crystal-clear lagoon beyond, I have another pool, too. That one, which also has a palm island—and a waterfall tumbling into it—is in my bathroom. Or, as you might more accurately call it, my bathing pavilion, its amenities including an outdoor shower and a tub sunk into a polished wooden deck.

No doubt, this is an “oh wow” place. I have felt this ever since I arrived by seaplane and was diffidently asked to remove my shoes, which would be stowed with my luggage just as I assume Madonna's were when she visited.

The feeling was heightened when Waheed, my private butler—or, as he is also known, my Mr. Friday—first showed me to my villa, one of sixty-five scattered along the sandy beaches of the island. My thatched-roof villa, with a design-driven interior of rich fabrics and bright colors, is so tucked away amid banyan trees and sweet-smelling frangipani that it is hard not to imagine myself as Robinson Crusoe.

But Soneva Fushi's wow factor, common enough in the Maldives, where more than a few of the hundred or so resorts can cost thousands of dollars a day, is not the only reason it is special. What really sets the place apart is something I can confirm by picking up my phone and calling Waheed, whose sole job while I am here is to get me just about anything I ask for.

“Waheed, can you bring me a bottle of Perrier?”

“No, Mr. Bob.”

“Pellegrino?”

“No, Mr. Bob, sorry.”

In fact, I already know that the only bottled water I can get at Soneva Fushi is produced on the island by the resort, which converts seawater into fresh and then bottles it, still or sparkling, in reusable glass bottles. The idea is to eliminate the CO2 emissions produced by shipping branded waters halfway around the world, and to remove plastic water bottles altogether. Used plastic bottles from elsewhere in the Maldives end up, at best, in a landfill known as the garbage island, which occupies what was once a coral-encircled lagoon near Male, the nation's tiny capital.

Soneva Fushi's bottling program, which eliminates the need for 45,000 plastic and 10,000 glass bottles that would otherwise come to the resort each year, plays a significant role in demonstrating that luxury tourism is not synonymous with overindulgent waste. Yet it is only one facet of a far more ambitious environmental effort by Soneva Fushi and its parent company, Bangkok-based Six Senses Resorts & Spas—an effort Six Senses CEO Sonu Shivdasani says we must all make before it is too late.

“If the world doesn't start doing its bit to combat climate change, the result will be disastrous,” says Shivdasani, who has been known for innovative environmental and social initiatives ever since he and his wife, Eva, opened Soneva Fushi, the first resort in the Six Senses group, in 1995. Global warming, he says, is like driving a car into a brick wall you don't see coming. “You don't realize the danger until it is way, way too late to put on the brakes.”

The danger, many experts agree, is approaching rapidly. Jonathon Porritt, a British environmental activist, co-founder of the nonprofit Forum for the Future, and participant in an eco-symposium at Soneva Fushi last year, says the atmosphere has the ability to absorb our annual greenhouse gas emissions for about another nine years, at which point global warming could well become impossible to reverse, triggering accelerated climate change. John Beddington, chief scientific adviser to the British government, is slightly less pessimistic about the timing but agrees that a “perfect storm” of environmental issues—bringing about food, water, and energy shortages—will hit the global economy by 2030. The result? Social unrest, cross-border conflicts, and mass migration.

“There is lots to be done in the next nine years,” says Shivdasani, who hopes to show people how to put on the brakes. He is doing it by attempting something no other luxury hotel group has ever been able to accomplish. “By the end of 2012, we want to have Soneva Fushi decarbonizing,” he says, by which he means that the resort would be absorbing more carbon dioxide than it is releasing into the atmosphere. And then he plans to take his campaign company-wide.

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—SONU SHIVDASANI, CEO OF SIX SENSES RESORTS

The Maldives is a particularly poignant place to launch such an experiment because of the dangers the island-nation faces as a result of climate change. Upon taking office as president in 2008, Mohamed Nasheed proposed using tourism income to buy land elsewhere in the world so that his 300,000 fellow countrymen would have somewhere to go if rising sea levels force them to become “climate refugees.”

Only a little less radical by comparison is Nasheed's proposal that the Maldives achieve carbon neutrality. “We all understand that our planet is under stress,” he said at an environmental conference at Soneva Fushi last year. “And we all understand that we have a very small window of opportunity to find a solution.”

However, trying to decarbonize Soneva Fushi alone is no easy task. Much of the resort's direct CO2 emissions (which don't include the huge but indirect amount attributed to guests' international flights) is the result of producing the energy needed to meet air-conditioning, hot water, and electrical demands. And to decarbonize, the diesel generators that are currently the source of most of that energy will have to be disconnected.

“That's our goal, to turn the generators off without giving up the luxury,” says Shivdasani, an elegant, soft-spoken man who was educated at Oxford.

Paradise Without the Perrier

In my role as an investigative reporter, I have come to Soneva Fushi to see what progress has been made. I am not traveling incognito, as I usually do, because I need to look behind the scenes at the resort and interview the staff who are implementing the environmental initiatives. My mission also requires me to understand why guests would want to come to the resort in the first place. Which is why my days begin with a bicycle ride along sandy paths that extend the length of the island. I could complete the tour in fifteen minutes or so if I were not so easily distracted by a swim, for instance, or a spa treatment (I may have set the record for how quickly one can fall asleep on a massage table).

There are meals, long ones, featuring greens from the resort garden paired with local seafood. And in the evenings, the choice is between the outdoor theater, the resort observatory, and tiptoeing over to the beach that has been reserved for the turtles. The resort's marine biologist, Kate Wilson, is expecting them to come ashore at any moment to lay their eggs in the sand.

At other times, chatting with my hosts, perhaps on the end of a dock or at a bike-path crossroads, I hear about such Six Senses initiatives as its Social and Environmental Responsibility Fund. Among the projects that the fund has paid for are a science lab for a local school and wildlife conservation work, including joining the fight to ban commercial shark fishing in the Maldives.

Some of the time, I am in the company of Stuart Ward, who is managing director of Six Senses construction projects in the Maldives and Sri Lanka, and Mark Garrett, Soneva Fushi's permaculturalist, which essentially means he is the grand master of environmental matters. They show me much of the inner workings of the resort, including the “waste to wealth” recycling center (the reverse-osmosis system which produces the water that is bottled) and the kitchen gardens—Madonna loved them so much, Garrett points out, that she preferred taking her meals in one of them. I have to confess that there are times, amid the pumps, piping, and cardboard mulch, when I am only half listening, my mind fixated on the idea that the day is growing warm and it is time for a swim.

I do pay attention, though, when we visit a field of solar panels—a sea of black glass rectangles hidden discreetly behind the recycling center. They are a key element of a system that Ward says could eventually go a long way toward meeting the resort's decarbonizing goals. By the end of 2012, when the second part of the effort is to be completed, they will supply all of the resort's normal daytime electrical needs, with nighttime operations covered through a combination of biofuel, wind, and battery-stored solar power.

More problematic is how the resort will meet its air-conditioning needs without producing CO2 emissions. Shivdasani originally thought the solution was a pioneering system designed to provide cooling water by pumping it up from the ocean's depths. The pipes could not be anchored at the required depth, however, so the system had to be abandoned.

“It was a $1.2 million mistake, which was disappointing,” Shivdasani tells me. “But we learned from it and moved on.”

Now Soneva Fushi is working on a solar-powered system, still in the planning stages, that will not only run the air conditioners but supply hot water as well. Ward and Garrett show me where the solar collectors will go, but even when the system is working to capacity, it will meet only sixty percent of the demand. As with the electrical-power shortfalls, the idea is to rely on solutions that at this point are more envisioned than realized.

Is this whole carbon-neutral project just the pipe dream of a dilettante whose tiny initiative will be nothing more than a drop in the bucket? I wonder. Or is he a visionary whose experiment could be copied around the world?

“We are trying to lead the way in hospitality by setting an example of what can and should be done,” Shivdasani says. “This island is a microcosm of the planet. We can test and sample on the island, and achievements can be magnified globally.”

For Shivdasani, Soneva Fushi is just the beginning. He has set a target date of 2020 for decarbonizing all fifteen Six Senses properties, and hopes to be an example for local communities and other hotel brands, whose adoption of similar carbon-reduction practices could, taken as a whole, contribute to climate- and life-saving benefits for us all.

"We are trying to lead the way in hospitality. This island is a microcosm of the planet. We can test and sample on the island, and achievements can be magnified globally"

—SONU SHIVDASANI

I am a bit of a cynic by disposition. But I have seen enough environmental dead zones around the world—reefs in the Philippines destroyed by blast fishing, rain forests in the Amazon decimated by excessive logging—to hope that Shivdasani's project succeeds. And at the least, unlike most of the rest of us, he is doing everything within his power to do right by the environment without sinking his business.

The idea that we can all do something to help save the planet starts sinking in one morning over a breakfast of papaya, mango, and watermelon. Sitting barefoot in the sand at a table under the palm trees, I am lingering over my food, thinking about everyone at home and hoping it is snowing there. Suddenly, I overhear a woman at the table next to mine telling her husband to keep the camera battery they've just replaced so that they can dispose of it back home. Everyone's consciousness seems to be heightened by their stay at Soneva Fushi.

On a sunset cruise, we are distracted from the solar light show by a school of dolphins circling the boat, riding our bow wave, and jumping out of the water in an acrobatic display.

"Spinner dolphins," someone says, and another guest wonders if these mammals, too, are on a tour, getting a close look at the species that's causing every other one so much trouble.

Thoughts about this fragile place—and the need for us all to cut back on our carbon emissions—strike me again as I outfit myself with mask and fins and drift in the current above an aquarium-like reef that more than once has suffered damage from climate-related coral bleaching. Thankfully, I can still spot thousands of colorful swimmers, among them the multihued parrot fish, the yellow-faced sweetlips, and the clown fish, instantly recognizable to anyone who has seen the children's film *Finding Nemo.* My personal favorite is the titan triggerfish that is part of the reef-maintenance detail, chomping away at such coral damagers as snails, sea urchins, and crown of thorns starfish. All the reef's inhabitants look healthy enough now, but not even science knows what a slight rise in ocean temperatures could do.

On the final evening of my stay, I am reminded yet again of how little it would take to destroy this environment. It is the night of an international event called Earth Hour, in which buildings and landmarks around the world, including the Sydney Harbour and Golden Gate bridges, turn their lights off as a statement about the need to take responsibility for climate change. At Soneva Fushi we mark the hour with a candlelit dinner on a tiny islet about five minutes away by speedboat. With the ripple of waves barely audible, the air touched with the scent of Eastern spices, and seemingly every star in the sky visible, somebody says, "You know, if sea levels do rise, this little bit of paradise may be the first to go."

Of course, cynics could point out the irony of that sentiment. First, the carbon emissions resulting from running the boat that brought us from the resort are part of the problem. Second, and far more serious, the carbon emissions from our international flights to and from the resort amount to 3.1 tons per passenger, on average, and account for seventy-six percent of all carbon emissions associated with our visit.

Those kinds of numbers leave you wondering "Is it right to go at all?" So I ask Shivdasani, and his answer is yes.

"When you consider that fifteen to twenty percent of greenhouse emissions are from deforestation, and one to two percent are from tourism," he says, "you can argue that if you didn't have tourism conserving big tracts of land around the world, the impact on greenhouse emissions would be much greater."

In the Maldives, of course, there are no big tracts of land, but it was tourism, Shivdasani reminds me, that helped bring about a ban on shark fishing.

In the short term, he says, there is no solution for eliminating flight emissions. So he is investing in projects that either absorb carbon or reduce carbon emissions elsewhere. Soneva Fushi charges guests a two percent "carbon

tax" and uses the money for such carbon-mitigating projects as building a power-generating wind turbine for a rural community in India, planting trees on deforested land in Thailand, and distributing energy-efficient wood-burning stoves in Darfur.

I am beginning to appreciate that the genius of people like Shivdasani is an optimism that admits to no problem's being unsolvable.

"In the long term, we'll fly on jet fuel made from municipal waste," he says. "They're building a plant for that in London that is supposed to be ready by 2014." I suggested that my city, New York, should be able to help out with that. But will there ever be a way, I wonder, to make sunset cruises and boat trips out to picnic islands environmentally guilt-free?

"Solar-powered speedboats," he says without hesitation. "I wouldn't be surprised if within two or three years we have them. It's something I'd like to earmark some funds for."

I think back to that islet just off Soneva Fushi and its lapping waves and its stars overhead, and have hope that it might be there for some time to come.

WORLD SAVERS

Each of Six Senses Resorts & Spas' fifteen properties, including Soneva Fushi, marries luxury with sustainability. Six Senses' Evason Phuket resort won a World Savers Award in 2010, and the parent company won this year.

For this year's World Savers Awards, see page 85.

It's Not Easy Being Green

Currently dependent on 9,000 barrels of diesel fuel a year—which produces 3,732 tons of carbon emissions annually—Soneva Fushi plans to decarbonize by 2020. Here's how . . .

INDIA

SRI LANKA

Male

MALDIVES

300 MILES

ASOLAR PANELS

The heart of the resort's decarbonizing effort is the solar-powered electrical and air-conditioning systems. (Diesel generators account for 77 percent of the resort's on-site CO2 emissions.) The first phase of the project produces 2.8 percent of electrical needs. At a cost of $3.5 million, additional systems are predicted to cut oil use and carbon emissions by another 63 percent.

BPIPE DREAMS

A $1.2 million deep-sea pipeline was intended to use water from the ocean's depths for the AC system, but the waters weren't cold enough here. (The system works at the InterContinental Resort in Bora Bora, among other places.) It is being replaced by a solar-powered system.

CTHE TRANSPORT TRAP

Airline travel for guests accounts for 16,524 tons of carbon emissions, or 75.7 percent of the resort's on-site and off-site total. Because it can't control this, it charges guests a 2 percent Carbon Sense Fund fee that supports emissions-offset projects around the world. The fund financed a $1.7 million wind turbine in India, which offsets approximately 3,500 tons of CO2 a year. It also finances energy-efficient cooking stoves in Darfur.

DRECYCLING

By recycling the considerable amount of paper it uses—mostly cardboard that arrives as packaging—Soneva Fushi reduced CO2 emissions by 19 tons in one year. The resort has reduced the trash it hauls to Thilafushi—the “garbage island”—from 194 tons a year to 140 tons. Soneva Fushi no longer imports bottled water, eliminating 45,000 plastic and 10,000 glass bottles a year. It converts 40,000 gallons of seawater into freshwater every day, bottles some, and sells some of that. Half the water revenues go to charities that help people access clean water. Food scraps are composted and used as fertilizer in the gardens, one of which they are able to maintain as organic. The gardens grow 35 percent of the resort's vegetables and 90 percent of its salad greens.

EGREEN DESIGN

The resort is working on improving energy efficiency in the villas. One challenge: Louvers let cool air escape when the air-conditioning is on, but eliminating them would encourage guests to run the AC constantly. Improvements in place or planned include LEDs, which cut energy use for lighting by 80 percent; and better insulation, which will reduce the energy needed to cool the villas.

—B. P.

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?*E-mail the editor: dinda@condenasttraveler.com*

Graphic

Picture, **MADONNA WALKED HERE**

Soneva Fushi is not only gorgeous, it's cutting-edge. The water you'll be served? Seawater, converted and bottled on the island (yes, it comes still or sparkling). The benefit? Fifty-five thousand fewer bottles shipped to the resort.

Picture, **NIRVANA AND NEMO**

Not only are Soneva Fushi's 65 villas built with sustainable materials but they are spacious and supremely private, with open-air bathrooms.

Picture, **NIRVANA AND NEMO**

The surrounding reef swarms with parrot fish, clown fish, triggerfish, and much more—diving lessons available.

Picture, Solar panels for electricity

Recycling plant

Organic vegetable garden

Library

0

400

FEET

Planned solar panels for air-conditioning

Villas

Abandoned deep-sea pipeline project

Villas

Bottling and water treatment

Jetty

Front office

Vegetable Garden

Villas

Villas

COMMUNITY GIVE-BACK

The resort funds nature trips that bring Male schoolchildren to the island, where they learn about climate change. It is also building a local school's science lab, and has financed a mobile medical team.

THE LITTLE RESORT THAT COULD Soneva Fushi's green technologies—from solar panels to water processing—are hidden behind palm trees and gardens that line the bicycle paths.

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